

Mar 11

Young Activists are America's Future

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Just one week after a horrific massacre in Parkland, Florida, left 17 students and faculty of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School dead at the hands of a former student, survivors and families of the deceased gathered for a CNN-hosted town hall to discuss gun control. Also in attendance were U.S. Senators Marco Rubio and Bill Nelson, U.S. Representative Ted Deutch, Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel and National Rifle Association (NRA) spokeswoman Dana Loesch.

Despite the list of recognizable adults, the stars of the event were the students who were still reeling and grieving. Despite the circumstances, their voices reflected their anger and determination. They spoke eloquently and without mercy toward the targets of their questions regarding the future of gun control.

These high schoolers have made their names known on the national stage through their demands for action to be taken on the matter of gun control. Emma Gonzalez, a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, gave a rousing speech at an anti-gun rally just days after the shooting, saying, "If all our government and president can do is send thoughts and prayers, then it's time for victims to be the change we need to see." Cameron Kasky, another survivor, called out Senator Rubio at the town hall for taking donations from the NRA. David Hogg, a student journalist who filmed a video about gun laws during the shooting, has called for a spring break boycott of Florida vacations until the state passes gun control legislation. Kyle Kashuy, who has served as a conservative face to the student-led movement, recently visited the White House and met with several

Along with all of the praise for their efforts, however, has come doubt and harsh criticism. Soon after the teens were all over national news, conspiracy theories arose that they aren't students but instead "crisis actors" who are paid by the left to push a gun control agenda. This has been targeted particularly at David Hogg, whose father once worked as an FBI agent.

General criticism is not surprising. Mass shootings tend to generate debate over whether or not the trauma of young victims should be politicized in the gun control debate on either side of the spectrum. While it's rather disturbing to think that there are individuals who genuinely believe in these horrific conspiracies, it's not the first time that the realities of mass shootings have been contorted in an attempt to prove the existence of a left-wing conspiracy to undermine the Second Amendment.

But what is surprising is the hesitance of many to take such student advocacy seriously. A tweet sent by disgraced television personality Bill O'Reilly after the Parkland shooting echoes the opinions of plenty of Americans:

"The big question is: should the media be promoting opinions by teenagers who are in an emotional state and facing extreme peer pressure in some cases?"

It is a valid question. These teenagers just went through a horrifically traumatic experience, so why should we be slapping their faces on the news? Isn't that taking advantage of their situation? But to think harder about this leads to the realization that such thinking severely underestimates both the resilience of teenagers and the impact that can be made by the activism of young individuals.

In short, it's easy to forget how much America owes to the youth who fought for their futures.

One of the earliest instances of this was the Newsboys Strike of 1899, which has been portrayed in popular culture through the successful musical and subsequent Disney film Newsies. After Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, two of New York City's most powerful publishers, refused to lower the high prices of their newspapers, the local newsboys staged a massive strike and boycott that eventually led to Pulitzer and Hearst making changes so that the children would be able to sell them at a profit and support themselves.

During the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, groups such as the Little Rock Nine, Freedom Riders, and Greensboro protesters were just teenagers when they left their marks on history. These individuals faced verbal and physical abuse as well as arrest for their civil disobedience that ultimately fostered legal and social change.

In the Vietnam era, a group of students in Des Moines, Iowa, were suspended for wearing black armbands in a silent protest of the controversial war. The students and their families then sued the school district for violating free speech, and with *Tinker v. Des Moines*, the United States Supreme Court ruled 7-2 in their favor and determined that student rights need to be protected, even in the classroom.

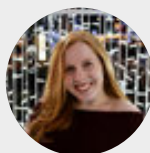
Even if we were to disregard the Parkland activists, these trends translate into the present. A recent UCLA study found that there was a 2.9 percent-increase between 2014 and 2015 in the number of students who said that they had a “very good chance” of participating in student protests and a 9.5-percent increase in the number of respondents who said that they had a “very good chance” of voting at any point during their college career.

There’s an idea in America that gone are the days when children were not informed enough to involve themselves in politics. The fact of the matter is that those days never really existed. In one of the most volatile political eras of American history, who is to say that young people should be excluded from the narrative? Does their age invalidate their beliefs and desires for the future? The answer to both: absolutely not.

America’s youth holds quite a large stake in the future, and to see these individuals making their voices heard for the sake of change should be praised, not questioned. Teens have more awareness than some like to give them credit for, and to listen to them is to listen to the future of America.

Culture

youth



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